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We Needn't Rule Out the Use of Force Against Terrorists

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How should the United States respond to terrorism? Are we powerless to do anything more than further fortify our embassies and warn citizens that they leave our shores at their peril? Is the only alternative to sink down to the dirty war waged by our terrorist opponents, hire our own crew of assassins and match them car bomb for car bomb? No, there are other courses of action consistent with our interests and values, including the use of force.

In combating terrorism abroad we face a twofold problem. On the one hand, it confronts what has unfortunately now become "ordinary" terrorism. This is a diverse threat; all sorts of terrorist groups have attacked U.S. targets in 72 countries since 1968. Dealing with this type of terrorism is the responsibility of the host government; the American response has been primarily defensive.

State-sponsored terrorism, however, poses a different problem. Here we confront a campaign of terrorism instigated and directed by a handful of adversary states. Its violence is deadlier and can have a serious effect on American policy. Here, defensive measures may not be enough.

Combating state-sponsored terrorism may require diplomatic and economic sanctions and, if these fail, the use of military force. We should not dismiss economic and diplomatic sanctions too readily. It is true that verbal denunciations and shutting down embassies seem to have little effect on governments that combine revolutionary zeal, religious righteousness and political ruthlessness. And in our interdependent world economic sanctions seldom work, even if they can be applied.

However, our government has another option: The White House could lay out the evidence against a state sponsor of terrorism before Congress and the American people, and seek a resolution authorizing actions consistent with belligerent status—including the use of force. Such a resolution would not oblige us to use force, nor would it necessarily eliminate the element of surprise. The if, when and how would remain our choice.

What would this accomplish? It would warn Americans and other foreign nationals to get out of the way. It would discourage foreign investment in the culprit country. Insurance costs rising to wartime rates would inhibit that country's trade. It would compel our adversary to disperse or increase defenses around vital targets. Without a shot being fired by us, it would impose great costs on them.

If we should consider using military force, we must be clear and realistic about the objective. It would be very difficult to cripple terrorists or the ability of their state sponsors to persist in their campaigns. Terrorist operations require only a handful of people recruited from a large reservoir, and assassination and bombing don't require much logistical infrastructure.

Can the United States persuade state sponsors to desist? Given the nature of the leadership that we confront, this is problematical. But if persuasion is dubious, doing nothing at all is useless.

Can we dissuade other governments from adopting terrorist tactics as an instrument of policy? Possibly. Can the United States demonstrate, for whatever it is worth in international diplomacy, that we are not impotent? Probably. Can the government satisfy the sector of public opinion that demands that we do *something*? Certainly, but by itself that is not a sufficient reason to launch a military action.

If the United States decides to use military force in response to state-sponsored terrorism, whom does it hit? The advantage of operations against the terrorists themselves is the direct connection: They ~~attack~~ you; you attack them. That makes it easy to justify. The disadvantages are the paucity of lucrative targets and the risk of civilian casualties.

Military operations against state sponsors present different advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, states offer a richer assortment of vulnerable targets, and civilian casualties might be avoided. On the minus side, we need proof of the connection between terrorist and sponsor; attacking a state incurs political liabilities, and there is the risk of escalation.

Military options are never attractive. Justified or not, military action comes down to shooting people, and we should resort to such means only for compelling reasons. We may decide that we simply can no longer tolerate threats, intimidation and the murder of our civilians. But we may also conclude that military force is too risky, too costly and too doubtful of success. If so, we may decide to tolerate terrorist attacks as something that we can live with a bit longer.

The difficulties in applying military force make covert action look attractive. But, while covert operations may be necessary under extraordinary circumstances, if we are obliged to use force in response to terrorism we ought to do so with the legitimately constituted armed forces of this country—openly, and with an unambiguous message as to who is responsible and why we are doing it.

We cannot enter a contest uneasily, hesitantly or ambivalently, conceding our opponent the advantages. While he remains difficult to locate and identify, we are vulnerable to attack. We will debate each action; he will not hesitate to act. We will worry about harming innocent bystanders; he will have no such restraint.

If our long-range goal is to dissuade other countries from adopting terrorist tactics as a form of surrogate warfare, we will not promote that goal by blurring the distinction between legitimate armed conflict and international terrorism.

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